

Women on tape

Spinning tales and tailspins

At the end of a shimmering, fascinating videotape about (among many things) Descartes, reason, and spinning out of one's head, Mother God tells us: Thou cannot so well learn a thing when it has been learned from another as when it has been discovered from thyself. This might well be the theme of the interesting Women's Video Festival currently at the Kitchen.

To say women "tell" about their own discoveries and experiences in the festival's videotapes is to understate the case. Lesbians made a tape about lesbian mothers (and showed guess what?). Four women who were raped made "The Rape Tape" talking about their own rapes and taking turns handling the camera themselves. And a woman made a tape about her own abortion where she called some of the shots from the operating table as several video and film camera-women stumbled into each other's pictures, trying to photograph everything. The only aspect of the abortion we are mercifully spared is the conception.

The festival includes work on many topics, from tattooing to transsexuals. Women "generated" (which usually means

produced) the tapes, some of which were also worked on by men. It is an "open" festival: all technically playable tapes were shown, which accounts for the range of quality: excellent to awful. Most were quite good.

Some of the tapes on women's subjects were perhaps more interesting for the subject matter than for the use of the video medium. "The Rape Tape" by Under One Roof Video, for example, is an unedited tape of women talking about their experiences being raped. They tell compellingly of rape's aftereffects, fear and police indifference, and make us wonder why some women are perpetual victims, targets of attacks again and again. The tape also has some surprisingly humorous, poignant moments, when a woman tells how her friends talked her into reporting her rape by a white man to the police "to do something for civil rights." The camerawork is good, but a little editing might have improved an interesting tape.

"Lesbian Mothers" by Queer Blue Light Video is an intelligent documentary composed mostly of interviews where women tell of their evolution into lesbianism, their ostracism, and their fears of

losing their children. It also includes tender scenes with the children who, the tape says, adapt easily to having lesbian mothers. But the end of the tape is a plethora of pubic hair which I found a turn-off. By now, scenes of lovemaking or nude tenderness have been shown so often they are a drag, and making the love-making lesbian adds nothing redeeming.

An exuberant, playful tape of a poem on "Descartes," written and read by Joanne Kyger with visuals by Robert Zagone, made full use of the video medium. Images are superimposed. Wild black and white dots flare out of eyes and fingertips. These dazzling pyrotechnics, which are used in too many experimental products for their own dizzying sake, work brilliantly here because they are suited to the subject of a woman spinning out of her head and trying to draw reason out of chaos. I especially liked the script, Kyger's poem, which owed much to Descartes, and much to the inventiveness and humor of its author.

This was a professional two-inch tape produced several years ago at the National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco. Other tapes in the festival were half-inch, and produced with simpler equipment, but Steina and Woody Vasulka show how much fun a bit of imagination can produce in just a few minutes of tape. In the Vasulkas' "Let It Be," a cruel mouth fills the tv

screen, moving to the tune of "Let It Be," but showing the brutality of "Let It Bleed." The contrast between the evil sight and the peaceful sound is very disconcerting.

Susan Milano has developed a style of intercutting brief, perfectly earnest man-on-the street interviews with a story for grand comic effect. "Tattoo" by Milano (who was one of the coordinators of the video festival) opens with a tattooed elderly lady describing her body. Her almost coquettish manner seems out of place for an elderly tattooed lady, and it seems at first that we are about to see an exploitative film. But soon we hear a nice young tattoo artist explain his art, and listen to the tender story of the tattooed lady's transformation from a bearded lady in love into her present colorful state. A tape that could have been an easy put-down of a fat target turns into a complex and compassionate portrait. Ann

Arlen's "Ex-Attica Conversations" was a fine interview with two ex-Attica inmates.

The festival also had its lower moments. There was, for example, a wretched tape about a parade that would make a potent Alka Seltzer commercial. The camera was so unsteady, so ceaselessly zooming in and out of floats and swirling rapidly around the scene, so dipsomaniacally jiggling even for close-ups that I can only recommend that anyone with any tendency toward seasickness avoid the tape.

But I recommend the festival. It shows that much can be done, without long professional training, with half-inch videotape, a medium that is far cheaper than film and easy to experiment and work with. Some of the best videotapes from the festival will be at the Kitchen at 240 Mercer Street tonight (Thursday) through Saturday.

—Robin Reisig

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